

Judgment in Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*

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The occasion for Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* is a crisis of judgment. A distinguished friend has sent a messenger to ask More about "matters that are actually very certain and beyond doubt, but that have, nevertheless, recently been called into question by wicked people" (39).¹ In essence, More's friend wants to know More's own judgment on these matters, matters of great importance throughout Christendom. As is evident from the citation above, More has a definite position on the matters in question; but the fact that his friend has sent a messenger to convey More's response introduces further complications. "[O]ne business begets and brings forth another" (39). The first business of receiving the messenger and engaging him in dialogue is only a beginning. Upon reflection, More becomes convinced that he must take on the second business of writing a faithful account of his conversation with the messenger to send along to his friend. Finally, this second business gives rise to the third, namely, publishing the book himself.

The exact reasons that led from one business to the next need not concern us at present. It is enough to make two observations. First, the ultimate reason for the messenger's visit is to determine More's judgment on important matters affecting all Christendom. As the dialogue unfolds, we see that there has come to be a crisis of judgment throughout the Christian world on such practices as praying to saints, venerating images, and going on pilgrimages. According to More, these practices are "actually very certain and beyond doubt"; but disagreement on these and other matters threatens to destroy the unity of Christendom. Second, the original request from More's friend leads naturally to the string of judgments More outlines in the opening pages of the dialogue. Indeed, as More relates the situation, the very fact that we have a published dialogue to read is closely connected to the original request of his friend, one business of naturally begetting another.

As the dialogue unfolds, we find that judgment is foundational to the questions at issue. Should one trust one's own judgment when it is at variance with the judgment of the Church? How does anyone judge anything correctly? Can judgment be educated or trained? Throughout the dialogue More the author puts the character and judgments of the interlocutors on display. By comparing the character and judgments of these interlocutors, we are challenged to sharpen our own judgment.

To see what I mean, let's begin by considering the character More. Of course, we as readers start off inclined to trust More's judgment since the messenger has come seeking that very thing. Beyond this, though, the dialogue provides other reasons to trust More's judgment. Upon hearing the initial remarks of the messenger and considering how "numerous" and "weighty" they were, More kindly dismisses the messenger and asks him to return the following day. In the meantime,

¹ All citations are taken from St. Thomas More, *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Mary Gottschalk (NY: Scepter, 2006).

More prepares for their exchange:

I began to put together in my mind the whole purport, as my memory would serve me, of all that he had presented. And because I wanted it easier to look at, so that I could the more fully and effectively respond to it, leaving no part unanswered, I briefly committed it to writing, in the order in which he presented it... (55).

The care with which More approaches his upcoming dialogue with the messenger is some indication of how concerned he is with making sound judgments.

A similar sort of care is reflected in the remarks made by the author More in his introduction to the dialogue, where he speaks of submitting his written work to the judgment of others: “I yet would not presume to print and publish any book, about anything having to do with our faith, unless men more learned than myself should consider it either profitable or, at least, harmless” (42). Here More introduces a principle regarding judgment, one that will be central to his understanding of right judgment throughout the dialogue. For More, one ought to submit one’s own judgment to that of other “virtuous and intelligent men” (42). But what is one to do where such men disagree? In these cases, “since it would not have become me to be judge over the judgment of those whom I had chosen and taken for my judges, ... I had no choice but to go along with the majority” (42–43). This principle of judgment, established by the author in his introduction, is dramatized in the character More throughout the dialogue. In fact, establishing the authority of the Church as fully trustworthy on all essential points of the Christian faith is arguably the foundation for More’s entire case on behalf of praying to saints, venerating images, and going on pilgrimages (see, e.g., I.18).

Alongside the authority of the Church, though, More makes room for other guides to private judgment as well. When responding to the messenger’s insistence on studying Scripture alone, More contends that the safest course is “to use, with virtue and prayer, first the judgment of natural reason, for which secular literature is very helpful; secondly, the commentaries of holy theologians of the Church; and thirdly, above all else, the articles of the Catholic faith received and believed throughout the church of Christ” (149). Though the ultimate authority in matters of faith is always the teachings of the Church, the diligent student of Scripture will also avail himself of the writings of great theologians as well as the greatest secular authors throughout the ages. For More, then, faith and reason are not at odds. “And therefore let reason be well guided, for assuredly,” More says, “faith never goes without her” (159). Consider the following passage, wherein More elaborates the point showing how philosophy, poetry, and all the liberal arts have a critical part to play—not only in the study of Scripture, but also in the formation of judgment:

Now, in the study of Scripture ... albeit I do not deny that grace and God’s special help are the big thing here, God does nevertheless use an instrument for that purpose our reason.... And just as the hand becomes more nimble by the practicing of some feats, and the legs and feet the more swift and sure by habitual walking and running, and the whole body the more wieldy and healthy by some kind of exercise, so too there is no doubt that by study, effort, and exercise in logic, philosophy, and the other liberal arts, reason is strengthened and invigorated, and judgment—both in them and also in orators, laws, and historical writings—much matured. And although poetry is by many people taken for nothing but flowery words, it yet much helps the judgment and, among other things, makes one well equipped with one particular thing without which all learning is half lame...a good mother wit. (159–60)

According to More, philosophy, poetry, logic, and the other liberal arts in various ways contribute to the growth and maturation of judgment. So in addition to the accountability one has by submitting one's private judgment to the teachings of the Church, More also advocates the study, effort, and exercise in philosophy, poetry, and the liberal arts as means of strengthening and sharpening one's judgment. And just as it is evident throughout the dialogue that More submits his own judgment to the authority of the Church, so also it is clear that his judgment has been strengthened and sharpened by the kind of study, effort, and exercise he advocates.

By way of contrast², the messenger seems all too ready to do away with the aids to judgment More advocates. He declares that philosophy is the "mother of heresies" (153) and reason itself is a "great enemy of faith" (156). Furthermore, in his defense of Scripture the messenger disregards the authority of the Church. In criticizing the messenger's position, More argues, "whereas God would have the Church be your judge, you would now be judge over the Church" (199). Apart from the safeguard of the Church's authority and the strengthening and sharpening influence of philosophy, poetry, and the liberal arts, the messenger's judgment is very ill-equipped to handle the complexity and gravity of the questions under discussion. Regrettably, his judgment (at least initially) bears striking similarities to that of Luther, who proudly trusts his own interpretations over those of the Church (410 ff.).

The dramatic action of the dialogue is, among other things, the development of the messenger's judgment. He comes to see, as More pointed out at the beginning, that these matters are "actually very certain and beyond doubt." As the messenger is exposed to the dialectical exchange with More, his judgment is sharpened and strengthened. The development is gradual, and there are certainly new obstacles along the way (for instance, in Part Three when the messenger returns from university after having lost a debate); but overall the messenger comes to see the wisdom of More's decision in submitting his judgment to that of the Church as well as More's use of logic and the liberal arts to strengthen his judgment and defend his positions.

² In what follows, I am drawing attention to the central flaw More intends to display in the character of the messenger. Apart from his judgment, the messenger appears to be a rather likeable fellow. He is a lively interlocutor—bright, humorous, at times very convincing.